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## From refugee to USACE project manager of the year

### **KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan** —

How does a young Vietnamese refugee with no English, no money and no education go on to become a licensed professional engineer and in 2012, recognized as the best project manager in the entire U.S. Army Corps of Engineers?

“A little bit of luck and whole lot of drive,” said Viet Nguyen, PE, PMP.

Nguyen, 43, who is currently based in Kandahar, Afghanistan, manages several critical construction projects aimed at supporting both Afghanistan’s security and stability. He represents just one of some 37,000 USACE employees in 90 countries providing vital public engineering services in peace and war to strengthen security, energize economies and reduce risks from disasters.

Nguyen, who normally serves within the USACE Fort Worth District in Texas, earned the 2012 Project Manager of the Year award for leading some of the largest Base Realignment and Closure Act 2005

developments. Among the projects was the state-of-the-art, DoD Medical Education Training Campus at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. With more than 24,000 annual graduates, the METC is the largest complex of its kind with more than 2.6 million square feet of facilities valued at \$745 million. At the campus, enlisted personnel in all branches of the Armed Forces train to become medical professionals, including combat medics, respiratory therapists, behavioral health specialists and dozens more specialties.

“It was an honor to help build a facility that will educate and train America’s finest enlisted health care professionals,” said Nguyen. “These students will provide crucial medical attention to troops both on and off the field, and I am pleased to know that they are learning and training in the highest-quality facility possible.”



*Lt. Gen. Thomas Bostick, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, presents Viet Nguyen P.E. and PMP with the Project Manager of the Year Award for 2012. Nguyen, who normally serves at the Fort Worth District is currently deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan where he manages critical infrastructure projects aimed at increasing the Afghan government’s ability to provide security, stability and economic opportunity for its citizens. (USACE Photo)*

Formal education and training are perhaps more important to him than the average person because Nguyen and his four siblings struggled against immense odds just to attend school. In 1975, as knowledge that America's pullout from Vietnam was eminent, Nguyen's father, Diep Nguyen, a brigade commander in the South Vietnamese Army evacuated his family from Hue, near the demilitarized zone, to Saigon, some 400 miles away. This meant abandoning the beautiful family home near the banks of the *Sông Hương* or Perfume River.

"It was a beautiful place, a happy place. It wasn't a huge house, but it was my home; It was a beautiful place," repeated Nguyen.

Nguyen was about seven years old when his family fled Hue. Nguyen's father stayed back with his troops and became a prisoner of war in 1975. Seventeen years passed before Nguyen saw his father again. Saigon had fallen to the communists and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was declared in 1976. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City. The family struggled to survive in the immediate post-war years. The Nguyens, like many others who supported the Americans and South Vietnamese, were discriminated against and the children were not allowed to attend school. The family went from a life of stability and abundance to poverty and persecution. Nguyen began working with his mother, Quynh Phan, around age 11.

"My mother and I spent long hours selling fruits, vegetables, clothing and later even selling individual cigarettes on the street," said Nguyen.

Phan was determined to seek and find a better life for her children and she wanted to make sure each of them had the opportunity to go to school. She wanted to get the family to the United States, said Nguyen.

From 1975-1986, an estimated 1.7 million people fled Vietnam, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees statistics. Most fled by boats to whichever free Southeast Asian country they could access and some escaped over land through Cambodia.

"I don't know how she did it, my mom; the courage, the desperation, sending her kids," said Nguyen of his mother's decision to send her children by boat to refugee camps. "She didn't want to put us all in one basket in case there was an accident or something worse," Nguyen said, so in 1982, when Nguyen was just 13 years old, his mother bid him farewell as he and two teenage cousins sailed away in a 30-foot fishing boat packed with more than 100 passengers.

Pham had successfully sent two of her other children by boat to a refugee camp the year prior. Those two children were surviving in Thailand.

Refugees aboard the vessel had no food and less than a half cup of water each per day. No one could stretch out because the boat had been overloaded with people, explained Nguyen.

The 1,200 nautical mile journey on the choppy South China Sea en route to a refugee camp in Malaysia took 14 days.

"The first few days people were ill; vomiting. When we finally arrived on the shore people could not even walk they were so weak," he said. "Some older folks died on the spot."

The dead were buried and an informal prayer service was held for them by the remaining refugees, Nguyen said.

After two weeks in a camp in Malaysia, Nguyen and his cousins were transported to the United Nations High Commissioner Galang Refugee Camp in Indonesia. Since they were minors, they were sent to a section of the camp for orphans and children who were traveling alone. He lived in an open bay that he shared with about 100 other children. It was in Galang that the value of teamwork was crystallized for the young Nguyen.

“Survival was about teamwork,” he said.

About every two weeks refugees would receive food rations. Some would get rice; others got cans of meat or vegetables.

“If you just opened up a can of meat, maybe it would last you two days. You had to work together to create meals that would last you until the next food ration,” he said.

After about 15 months in Galang and a series of interviews with U.S. immigration authorities, Nguyen and his cousins were granted asylum in the United States. An American couple in Olympia, Wash. provided the Nguyen teenagers with sponsorship and helped them access government assistance, faith-based financial aid and an apartment. The teenagers took care of each other for about six months until Nguyen’s mother and his two youngest siblings were also granted asylum and immigrated to Olympia. Nguyen’s siblings who had first fled to Thailand arrived in Olympia safely too. All of the Nguyen family, except for Diep Nguyen who remained a POW, reunited in Washington. Each had made the dangerous journey by boat to a refugee camp first. For three years Nguyen and seven of his family members lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Nguyen described lean times in which even shopping at thrift stores was a luxury and the family would sift through dumpsters to find household goods. Although they were poor, they were safe and had enough food to eat. Much to Phan’s delight, all the children attended school, even though learning English was not easy for them.

“There was no ESL (English as a Second Language courses) and we couldn’t really communicate with others,” said Nguyen.

Nguyen did have an English-Vietnamese dictionary and there were a couple of subjects Nguyen was really excited about.

“Math and science,” he said. “I was fluent in that.”

After high school, Nguyen enrolled at Pierce College, a community college in Woodland Hills, Calif. where he completed lower division courses and met Thao Pham, the woman who would later become his wife and mother of his two children, Tyler, 10 and Ethan, 8. While at Pierce College, he also worked at an assembly plant. He then transferred to California State University Northridge and earned a bachelor of science in civil engineering and went to work for a private architectural and engineering firm doing structural design. A friend encouraged him to apply for a job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He was selected for a position at the Fort Worth District in 1995 where he served until he accepted a position with the Naval Facilities Engineering Command in San Diego, Calif. He subsequently returned to the USACE, followed by completing the competitive Sustaining Base Leadership and Management Program for exceptional civilians, a deployment to Iraq, emergency response work during Hurricane Katrina and eventually his current position at the Afghanistan Engineer District-South in Kandahar.

As for the other Nguyen children, all of them mastered English and went on to college. One became a computer scientist, one a pharmacist and the two others became medical doctors.

Of his award, Nguyen said, “I never set out to win project manager of the year. I just wanted to be the best project manager I could be.”

His advice for fellow project managers, “Honor your commitments to your customers and your team,” Nguyen said. He added that it’s a good idea for project managers to consider earning the project management professional certification as well as becoming licensed or accredited in their fields.

“The licenses and certifications are about discipline and showing your customers and the people you are leading that you at least have the baseline knowledge,” he said. “You are able to do more things and it makes you more competitive.”

Nguyen also values frequent engagement with his customers throughout the lifecycle of projects.

“You need to have good communication with everybody involved and it has to be real,” he said, “not just the minimum contact required, but frequent contact because you want to create something that is going to make the customer happy.”

The projects he has managed that have made customers happy include work on the Brooks Army Medical Center, the Fort Hood Hospital, both in Texas, and now projects in Afghanistan.

“Viet is a stunning example of just how far hard work, dedication and personal courage can take someone,” said Col. Vincent Quarles, commander of the Afghanistan Engineer District- South. “He brings commitment to excellence and passion to every project he manages, and in doing so, he and others like him deliver facilities where Afghan Security Forces will live, work and train,” he said. These facilities will help enable Afghan authorities to provide effective security for their citizens. Viet is an excellent engineer and leader, so it’s no surprise he was selected as project manager of the year,” said Quarles. “America did much to help him; now he is doing much to help America help others.”

What’s next for Nguyen?

“I want to complete our projects on time and on budget here in Afghanistan and get back home safely to my family,” he said.

His family includes his father comfortably living in Escondido, Calif., a suburb of San Diego County. In 1992, the Nguyen family finally secured the release of their father from a hard labor camp in Vietnam and Diep Nguyen immigrated to the United States. “Dad was so frail, just 85 pounds,” said Nguyen. “But at least we were all together again. We all turned out OK; we’ve made our parents proud.”

*Editor’s Note: Mike Beeman contributed to this article*

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